2: Flannery E-5 (1940-1948) 1953
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CHAPTER II

TRIBAL ORGANIZATION

The greater bulk of our material on the Gros Ventres covers the fifty year span from about 1835 to 1885. During that period, the tribal territory centered about the Milk River. The present Reservation, the boundaries of which were finally fixed in 1888, represents only a small part of the land claimed and held by the Gros Ventres as their own.

Band Names and Affiliation

The political organization of the Gros Ventres was simple. The division into fairly autonomous bands was basic, and apparently the number of bands was twelve. Our informants, both those who were adult and those who were children, at the time when the whole tribe still encamped as a unit, agreed on that point. The list of band names given by our two oldest informants, Coming Daylight (b. 1854) and Singer (b. ca. 1856), is as follows: Coffees, Same as Assiniboine, Plenty Bad, Greys, Fast Travelers, Water Horses Once a Day, Upper Quarters, Frozens, Buffalo Overloaded, Tendons, Bloods, Night Hawks. These two old women maintained that, in their own experience, the bands camped in this order, and in a circle, when the whole tribe was together.

Quite independently of the above list, another was obtained from The Boy (b. 1870). As a child he witnessed the formation of the camp circle, and he knows many details of previous decades from his father, Lame Bull (b. ca. 1825, d. 1890) and from other old men. The Boy's list agrees with that given by the two women, except in regard to one band. He includes a group called Poor Greys and omits Night Hawks. All of our informants insisted that the Greys and Night Hawks were distinct bands, but there was a difference of opinion as to whether or not the Greys and Poor Greys were in reality the same band.

Seven of the band names can be identified with Kroeber's num-

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very much increased. White Eagle governed the people very wisely and he governed until he died."

It was The Boy's impression that following White Eagle, the chief of the whole tribe was no longer formally selected and simply attained his position through gradual recognition of his merits.[9] Sits Like A Woman succeeded White Eagle and was tribal chief in the first decades of the 19th century. He was followed by his son of the same name who was a signer of the 1855 treaty, and was still recognized as tribal head when he died suddenly about 1870. Coming Daylight claimed that this Sits Like a Woman II was certainly the greatest chief of her time and that, when he died, people were forbidden to light their camp fires as a sign of mourning. During the subsequent period Lame Bull was outstanding among the leading men, but he witnessed the dissolution of the band system and the camp circle. The Fort Belknap Reservation had been set up in 1873, encompassing much more territory than at present, and the first houses were built in 1882.

In spite of the fact that a tribal chief was recognized, band autonomy was apparently preserved. The ceremonial organization cut across band organization, however, and band autonomy was relinquished at the times during which the Sacred Dances were held. The movements and activities of the tribe as a whole were then in the hands of the company to which the vower of a particular Dance belonged.[10]

The Companies

Kroeber notes that "men of the tribe of age to make any one ceremony were not all in one society or company but in several, the total number of companies being three or four times as great as the number of ceremonies. Each company had a name which it

[9] So far as it goes, this would seem to confirm O. Lewis' interpretation, pp. 42–43, that the earlier Hudson's Bay Company policy on the northern plains reinforced tribal chieftaincy, but that with the development of competition in the fur trade, authority was weakened.

[10] For a discussion of the Sacred Dances, see Kroeber, 1908, pp. 239–68. Other details are given in Cooper, Ms. 1949. The following discussion is concerned only with the composition of the ceremonial organization so far as it can be reconstructed.

4: Flannery & Cooper E-5 (1939-1945) 1946
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stakes, but not for really large ones. A gambling game between two brothers-in-law, small though the stakes had to be, was a good show for the onlookers—not, however, nearly so good as one between two prominent enemy friends. Two sisters-in-law were also "just right" for gambling against each other.

Through all these three relationships run two currents: one of mutual goodwill and helpfulness, the other of familiarity, "teasing" and twitting. Between two brothers-in-law and two sisters-in-law there is relatively more of the first and less of the second; between brother-in-law and sister-in-law relatively more of the second and less of the first.

Two brothers-in-law could not discuss sex or vulgarity and could not go to the toilet together. They would be helpful to each other in giving presents, in a building project, in business matters, and so forth. But on the other hand they could go quite far in "humiliating" each other, in indulging in practical jokes and horse play at the other's expense, and in rivaling each other in war and in war-deed matching contests—but not to the limit, not so far as enemy friends could go. Two sisters-in-law could likewise "tease" each other, but could not go to the same length that brothers-in-law could go.

To her brother-in-law (sister's husband or husband's brother) a woman could go nearly any length in "teasing" and freedom in the way of crude horse play and of vulgar and obscene talk, and vice versa.

The gambling rule that prevailed, and still prevails largely, between these three types of siblings-in-law, namely, gambling for small stakes permitted and encouraged, but not for large stakes, appears to be genetically related to the two currents we have been discussing: the goodwill one prohibiting stakes whose loss would really hurt, the familiarity one permitting and provoking small-stake gambling.

The Gros Ventre, with a population range of between about 800 and 2,000 in the second half of the last century, were divided into about a dozen bands. These bands were not sibs proper, but each was composed largely of kin related by blood or marriage. Members of a given band, whether related or not, would not gamble against one another. There was a well-marked we-feeling among the members of a band, somewhat distinct from and additional to the kinship feeling proper. Actually this was almost equivalent to "tribal" we-feeling, for each band was for the greater part of the year, particularly in the winter months when the bands scattered to separate quarters within the tribal territory, an almost completely autonomous economico-political unit, and any band was free if it wished to secede from the tribe at any time, temporarily or permanently.